

Last Thursday, amid great fanfare on the U.S. Capitol steps, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced the long-awaited Democrat health care bill. While the details of the 1,990 page behemoth are still being studied, already it looks like a repackaged prescription for government takeover of health care.

Rather than telling the American people how a big government solution is needed to improve America's health care system, I have spent the last year listening to Alabamians' concerns about health care – what they want and what they would like to see changed.

Instead of a Washington-imposed plan, I've heard calls for meaningful medical liability reform, continued personal choice of doctors, and care decisions without government intrusion.

It's disappointing that the president and the speaker have, so far, chosen to force through a health care plan without including congressional Republicans' ideas of targeted market-oriented reforms to expand access to care and bring down costs.

Instead of government mandates and major tax increases, conservatives favor a step-by-step approach to fix what's broken while preserving the best in American health care.

The speaker's health care bill is expected to face a full House vote later this week. I will oppose it.

Tanker Competition Hits Snag:

The Air Force's recent release of a draft Request for Proposal (RFP) was greeted as a positive development in the delayed process to replace the aging aerial tanker fleet that has served our military for half a century. But after further review, the new tanker guidelines appear to be a step backward.

Our military's ability to safely and successfully conduct missions anywhere in the world depends upon mobility. For decades, the Air Force has relied on an Eisenhower-era aerial tanker fleet of KC-135s to extend the operating range of its aircraft.

The Air Force has been waiting on a higher performance aerial tanker since 2004 when a \$20 billion deal to lease and purchase modified Boeing KC-767 tankers fell through in the wake of a corruption scandal.

Southwest Alabama first emerged as a contender site to manufacture a new aerial tanker in 2005, when the North American division of the European Aeronautics Defence and Space Company (EADS) chose to locate its aerospace engineering center and tanker production facility at Mobile's Brookley Field. Northrop Grumman then teamed up with EADS to officially enter the tanker competition.

Progress toward a next generation aerial tanker was made in 2007 when the Air Force announced its request for proposals, and in February 2008, Northrop Grumman/EADS was selected as the winner. The decision was hailed as a victory for the Air Force which stood to gain from the significantly enhanced capabilities of the new aircraft design.

Unfortunately, that forward movement was halted soon after when competitor Boeing protested the tanker contract award, and months later, the Pentagon terminated the competition and reset the bidding process.

Last month, the Air Force released a new RFP to launch a new competition, but the new design guidelines are a disappointment.

Instead of calling for the best aerial tanker for our military, the Air Force has substantially lowered the bar. It has reduced the new tanker's minimum standards to a level that even the obsolete KC-135 could meet.

Ironically, while the number of mandatory requirements for the tanker has increased, many are of limited mission value to the warfighter. For example, the aircraft's lavatory waste flow rate is given equal priority to the tanker's refueling boom fuel flow rate (keep in mind that refueling other aircraft is the tanker's main function).

Looking at the requirements of the new draft RFP, it's hard not to reach the conclusion that the Pentagon is deliberately seeking to buy the least amount of aircraft for the money. This is disturbing given the repeated calls from combatant commanders for rapid deployment of a modern and more versatile tanker fleet that will accommodate future military aircraft and more challenging missions.

Last week, I joined other members of the Alabama Congressional Delegation in writing Defense Secretary Robert Gates to express deep concern with the new RFP and to request a meeting to discuss the competition process.

As it stands, the Air Force's decision to quickly move forward with a substandard tanker design

is the wrong direction for our military and a bad investment for the American taxpayer. We hope that Secretary Gates will restore focus on quality in the aerial tanker competition.

My staff and I work for you. If we can ever be of service, do not hesitate to call my office toll free at 1-800-288-8721.